



STONE HILL – A DOG LOVER’S DELIGHT

BY JAMES CLARKE, PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARY BROADLEY

The red brick road alone spoke of dedication: kilometres of half bricks, half-a-million of them I’m sure, all neatly laid and still tidy after countless vehicles had ridden over them for many years. Incredibly, the wide, handmade road, was laid mostly by two men – a former brick layer, Petros Mhlanga and an assistant.

The road carried us into the hills, high above Magaliesburg village, into a wonderful landscape of blue and gold - the gold of the winter veld and the blue of the sky.

The 360 degree view from the top is of mostly virgin veld, soft contours sparsely dotted with ancient wild olive trees, dark and dense, and the occasional sentinel *kiepersol* (cabbage tree), scarred survivors of countless veld fires, and several, lone-standing, *soetdorings* (sweet thorn) with their white needle-like thorns. In the distance, rank upon rank of hills and ridges. And we were just an hour’s drive from Fourways.

It was the last day of winter and, at the crest, where our accommodation was in one of the 10 widely spaced timber cottages, a southerly wind threatened to snap-freeze us.

The next day, the first day of spring, the temperatures dutifully soared into the mid-20s.

This was Stone Hill – a quiet, rural, self-catering resort to which the Tourism Grading Council of South Africa has awarded a four-star rating. You bring your own food – or you can have it sent up. Beautifully presented picnics, platters, breads and cakes are supplied by a neighbour or, if you pre-order a day before, the village Super Spar not only delivers everything but packs your fridge ready for your arrival.

Each cottage has a well-equipped and carefully designed kitchen - the work of Caroline de Villiers who, with Mark Morgan, owns Stone Hill. Caroline, a third generation Kenyan who settled here in 1970, designed the cottages, some being double storeyed

and all being well out of sight of the others. Each is individually fenced off. Why are they fenced? It’s because Stone Hill allows guests to bring their pet dogs.

The place was fully booked yet we rarely heard barking apart, that is, from the occasional happy anticipatory bark dogs give when about to be taken for a walk. The absence of what I call ‘suburban barking’ was partly because each family’s dogs are out of sight of the others and dog lovers (as opposed to dog owners) are, I have found, considerate types.

There’s a choice of walking trails either down to the river or following the wide paths through the grass-covered hills with great all-round views, including the blue ridge of the Magaliesberg that stretches towards Hartbeespoort.

I was not surprised to find scattered in the veld hundreds of pieces of Stone Age tools – broken scrapers and discarded cutting tools, left over the past million years and



more by the world's first humans. Some scientists now believe our predecessors, the 'man-apes' (*Australopithecus africanus*) which abounded in this region, used stone tools.

Not far away are the fossil-rich, world famous caves of 'The Cradle of Humankind' where our ancestors lived and developed their skills and tools.

There's a mysterious group of 10 overgrown mounds near the crest of Stone Hill - unmarked Boer War graves. Mark and Caroline are hoping some knowledgeable visitor will one day work out what happened there.

Apart from the exhilarating walks and wayside benches, it was the design of the cottages that intrigued me. Caroline put a lot of thought into it.

Each timber-built cottage has a large, separate braai facility with a sheltered inglenook - and an elaborate outside shower with a facility for washing dogs muddy, perhaps, from rolling in the river which is some distance below the cottages.



Each cottage's amenities include a solar geyser, DSTV, electric blankets, air conditioning and a fireplace. The kitchen has everything one can think of, including many thoughtful little touches - a welcoming sherry and, in a small box, a souvenir piece of quartzite from the hills. Sunken into the kitchen wall is a brilliant arrangement for waste-disposal - three chutes with covers labelled 'paper', 'plastic and tins' and 'compost'. There's also a powerful rechargeable wall light and another portable light for when Eskom fails.

Caroline (who owns several dogs and cats) can arrange a dog-sitter for those who want to go out. There's even a mobile dog spa that will come to one's cottage.



Although we did not have time to visit it, there is an adjacent farm - Happy Acres Old Mill - which has 12km of 'dog-friendly' walking trails and an environmental centre with a fungi house, a butterfly house and an educational zoological exhibit.

When we paid for our Stone Hill accommodation, I was pleasantly surprised how affordable it was.

For more information, contact Stone Hill on www.stone-hill.co.za.

